

## Music Liturgy for the Marginally Musical

It is easy to forget when you are at a conference full of wonderful musicians working tirelessly in their parishes that not all parishes are equally blessed with musicians. Now, if music in liturgy was a side issue that wouldn't matter that much but I want to talk about why it matters a lot and look at the reality of our situation and ways of addressing it. We can make things easier for the marginally musical to play in our churches and we can be looking at non-traditional instruments that are easy to play. I also want to discuss what are thought to be roadblocks to solutions that involve computer based solutions.

Who do I regard as marginally musical? Well, myself to start with. I am untrained and can strum a guitar. I read music slowly and with difficulty. I also spend far too much time playing with a program called Band in a Box, about which more later. Perhaps it could also describe a singer with a good ear who can't read music at all, but has a calling to contribute. It could mean someone who is very anxious about their playing and needs some support, preferably from other musicians, but maybe from technology. At our parish there are wonderful musicians, who if the need arises, can just sit at a piano and sight read an unfamiliar piece. The marginally musical in contrast and by necessity have to prepare and rehearse more.

So let's be honest with the problem we are facing. Music in liturgy in our parishes is patchy. In our suburban and country parishes it is poorly funded and hence relies on volunteers. Many of our organists are aging, for that matter, guitarists like me are struggling with arthritic hands and the barre chords in Michael Mangan's "Hearts on Fire" now fill me with dread. A recent post on a catholic web page described the situation in Western Australia, "Church music is all but dead outside the capital cities and not present in all parishes there." When trained, enthusiastic musicians not suffering from burn out are available, all can be well, or as well as church

musicians ever get. Barring a major shift in parish priorities to paid musicians with a career path and proper remuneration in Australia, which is a wonderful discussion for another time, the sad reality is that many parishes will struggle to have music for their liturgies and will need the marginally musical.

More quiet masses are an option, just a lousy one. Modern people need all the help they can get to see the numinous. The fear of Romano Guardini in 1964 that modern minds from the nineteenth century onwards had become incapable of the liturgical act is even more pressing than it was in the 1960s. T.S. Elliott diagnosed the post enlightenment person as having a “dissociation of sensibility” – that is our rational thought and our feelings are divorced in a way that was completely foreign to the premodern mind. Music is one of the few activities in which we can recover the nonrational (not irrational); feeling and thinking simultaneously and therefore more able to participate in the work of liturgy. If liturgy is the engine of formation, then music is the fuel.

Many church documents tell us about the importance of music liturgy, the most recent major document relevant to our situation is “Sing to the Lord”. The most relevant paragraph is:

STTL 26: Singing is one of the primary ways that the assembly of the faithful participates in the Liturgy. The musical formation of the assembly must be a continuing concern in order to foster full, conscious, and active participation.

Stepping way from laudable aspirations, let’s look at what you actually need to have music in a liturgy. From a purely practical point of view there are three functions required and you probably can’t do them all yourself just yet.

You need someone who knows the Mass as it is celebrated in that particular assembly and can prompt the musician when to play. I don’t care how long you have been coming to Mass, the cues for the musician take some learning and someone to tap on the head and whisper, “It’s time

for the Gifts - wake up.” You need someone to kick you before you launch into the Gloria in Lent and to give you the heads up that this Priest wants the Agnes Dei to go a certain length. Someone who can tell you that the song that you intended to play as the composer intended has never been sung that way here and everyone is going to sing it the wrong way so you better get used to it. This will reduce the number of times you do something that embarrasses you and more importantly disturbs the liturgical flow of the celebration.

I recommend that at the time you are being cajoled by the great and good of the parish to play music, you make it clear that it won't happen without the local expert standing next to you. This is all worth saying because you just might have musicians who are happy to help as long as they have their liturgy expert tapping on the shoulder and singers to assist and they know they don't have to be brilliant.

You need a method to get the singing started, and an indication of the melody, especially for new songs. That could just be a singer to lead or a melody instrument. An indication of tempo and key and an introduction of sorts would seem mandatory. Unaccompanied is great for well-known songs but even then someone has to get it started. I do not attempt music at Mass without someone to lead the singing because my guitar only plays chords. I've asked it to play notes but it refuses. This is difficult because it means you will have to deal with at least one person who thinks they can sing. You will also need to practice with this person. Really...

If a parish knows the song you are singing well, the leader can help them start at the right place and then sing quietly away from a microphone. If the song is new or the crowd reluctant they will need to be more forthcoming but there is a magic volume at which the assembly doesn't stop singing because they think are being entertained but they have enough reassurance that they are singing the correct song to try to sing. This ideally requires a functioning sound system with foldback or a plant in the assembly to throw your singer a dirty look.

If we are struggling to find musicians, one solution is to find instruments that are easy to play. You could use very simple instrumentation and voice. We have to remember no-one is giving a performance and no-one expects perfection. Autoharps are not a common instrument but they allow chords at the press of a button and can be strummed with minimal training. Ukuleles are enjoying a major resurgence and while the ordinary Uke is an unlikely liturgical instrument, except perhaps for Haas's "Song of the Body of Christ," with its tune's Hawaiian origin, the Baritone Ukulele is essentially a four stringed travel guitar. There are Ukulele clubs all over the place including many retirement villages so it is worth investigating. Even very beginner guitarists can play 6 chords in the key of G (ie G, C, F, Am, Em, D7) and an extraordinary number of songs can be played with these chords and a capo.

All music can be beautiful and sacred if it comes from the heart of the particular assembly. Inculturation applies everywhere – if your assembly is moved by Latin texts and chant and pipe organ music then that is what should be playing. If country music is more meaningful that should be used. It may be that simple instruments coming from within a community are more meaningful than very good musicianship.

If you have no musicians at all your options narrow. Unless you are born to acapella music like in some Islander traditions and American shape note singers, it's going to be a struggle, especially if you want to introduce new material.

Some parishes use a recording of a performance of the song. This is not ideal because it is a *performance* and so not necessarily something that people can sing along with and the key and tempo are obviously fixed and they cannot be adapted to the needs of the assembly. It encourages a culture of listening and is antithetical to participation.

The other option is using computerised backings in liturgy. I would like to make it clear that live music is the norm and should be so. I actually believe the best use of backing tracks is in learning

new pieces as they can be made exactly as the songwriter intended and as is written in the sheet music and that is a boon to the marginally musical. It's amazing how often I've found we have been playing songs incorrectly for years by entering in the notes exactly as written – that said by then the damage is usually done. But technology has got to a point where, as an alternative to no music, they will have to be at least considered for use in our liturgies.

When I started playing guitar in church I was even more average than I am now and often resorted to a bit of support from fairly primitive backings. Having used backings I am well aware of their drawbacks. A competent musician will act dynamically with the assembly and can react to unexpected occurrences. A backing cannot do that and they are actually harder to sing with than a live musician for that reason. The backing always wins.

I have been told, point blank, that recorded backings are forbidden in the Mass and that is that. But there have been a lot of prohibitions over the centuries relating to musical instruments in the liturgy and it might be useful to go over them.

The Pipe Organ was not accepted until the twelfth century. It was too noisy and unpredictable, played by bashing it with your fist and associated with secular entertainments. It only became acceptable over centuries with technological advancements in organ design and development of repertoire.

To show the gradual relaxation and acceptance of different instrumentations by Church documents, here is a list of documents with parenthetical notes on the technologies available at the time.

*Tra le sollecitudini* 1903 [no amplification, first acoustic sound recordings, only a pipe organ or orchestral instruments will fill a large space]

“...the proper music of the Church is only vocal, nevertheless the accompaniment of an organ is allowed.”

“...the pianoforte is forbidden in churches, as also that of all noisy and irrelevant instruments such as drums, kettledrums, cymbals, triangles and so on.”

(cf 2 Sam 6:5 “David and all the Israelites were dancing and singing with all their might to honour the Lord. They were playing harps, lyres, drums, rattles and cymbals.”)

*The 1958 Instruction* [Early Hi Fi, 33 1/3 records new, amplification primitive]

“Those musical instruments which by common consent and usage are suited only for profane music must be absolutely prohibited...”

“The use of ‘automatic’ instruments and machines such as the automatic organ, phonograph, the radio, dictaphone, or tape recorder, and other similar devices are absolutely forbidden...”

*Sacrosanctum concilium* 1963 [Folk music popular; Reel to Reel recorders becoming available]

“...the pipe organ is to be held in high esteem... but other instruments also may be admitted...on the condition that the instruments are suitable... for sacred use.”

*Musica sacrum* 1967 [Cassettes]

“...instruments that are generally associated and used only with worldly music are barred from liturgical services...”

*Musica in Catholic Worship* 1972 [Proper amplification more available]

“Musical instruments other than the organ may be used in liturgical services, provided they are played in a manner suitable to public worship.”

*Liturgical Music Today* 1982 [MIDI instruments on Commodore 64 and Atari ST]

“...music may be rendered in various ways: unaccompanied; or accompanied by organ, piano, guitar or other instruments”

“... music of today...regularly presumes that the song is accompanied.”

“Music... ought to be ‘live’. Recorded music...should, as a general norm, never be used within the liturgy **to replace** (my emphasis) the congregation, the choir, the organist or other instrumentalists.

*The Milwaukee Report* 1992 [CDs]

“While pre-recorded music should never replace the congregation and other ministers of music within worship, pre-recorded music can ... supply a resource that may be lacking in a local community.”

“[In] deciding whether or not pre-recorded music should be employed within worship ... it is first and foremost whether the recording will enable or impede the community’s participation.”

“technology can appear to be a useful solution to the unavailability of competent liturgical musicians. While there are some pastoral situations where this technology will aid and enable the prayer and song of the people, there are also inherent difficulties.”

*Sing to the Lord* 1997 [MP3]

“Recorded music may be used to accompany the community’s song during a procession outside and, when used carefully, in Masses with children... However, recorded music should never become a substitute for the community’s singing.”

What these documents demonstrate is the relativistic nature of the comments, which change markedly depending on the evolving social and technological situation. The statements soften to allow a wider range of instrumentation and an even to an acknowledgement of problems that pre-recorded music might help. Since *SC* tells us that active participation is to be achieved above all else, the very valid proviso is that non-live music should not replace musicians nor discourage

participation. Of course if there are no musicians they aren't replacing anyone. The documents will likely continue to catch up with actual practice where the pastoral need has arisen. I have found from private communications that "minus ones", from the old "Music Minus One" records, are commonly used in Asian churches and also by some ethnic groups in Australian churches, who have at times requested MIDI backings from me. They are also in use in rural parishes.

What the writers of the documents could not foresee were the advances in computing that now make it possible for a community to make their own backings specific to their situation that encourage participation, until enough real musicians are available.

If you aren't ready for computer backings there are some pre-recorded options. There are commercially available backings designed for congregational use (eg AOV, Emmanuel, John Burland). They are often bundled in packs with the sheet music and serve the other purpose of teaching new songs. You can also get a huge repertoire on CDs called "No Organist No Problem." Parishes using LicenSing have access to backing tracks through that service.

Outside of those sources, most of the backings available are for Praise & Worship or Protestant hymns (ChristWill; Worship House Media, Worship Backing Band, etc.) The United Methodist Church in the US helpfully provides piano backings for their musically deprived chapels.

I fear relying on commercially available pre-recorded backings will be hard across the whole repertoire of your parish.

MIDI is an ancient technology from the 1980s. It can be played on many keyboards, originally with disk drives, now using USB sticks. The files are tiny and editable, which is useful. Because it is ancient technology some of the software actually worked better on Win98 computers, but there are still programs, many that cost nothing, that can be used with MIDI files. They sound

average when played through an ordinary computer's soundcard, better on a keyboard, better yet on a standalone midi player (becoming rare) but quite OK with a soft synth on a normal PC.

One free way to do this is to use CoolSoft Virtual Midi Synth with your choice of a freeware SoundFont Bank (eg Fluid R3) through a player like Van Bosco's Karaoke Player. A much better recent innovation is MyMIDI Player ([mymidi.audio](http://mymidi.audio)) a free program developed by a Uniting Church minister in North Queensland that has access to many public domain hymns as well as links to purchase hymns. It will play any MIDI file that you make and sounds very impressive through an ordinary computer. It uses soft synth sounds and has the excellent feature of storing your editing changes to the key, tempo and mix. There were commercially made MIDI files available in their heyday but as far as I can tell they are no longer widely available. WorshipTrax in the UK have a few but not many Catholic songs. There are free files on the net especially for public domain hymns but the quality is overall lousy. An exception is Small Church Music, run by a minister in WA, but which now only caters for public domain hymns. With many keyboards you can get a human pianist to record MIDI files that you can then edit to suit your situation and use for future liturgies. Any MIDI file you get can be edited (key, tempo, mixing) with a freeware program like Anvil Studio. You could in theory make MIDI files from scratch but don't, life is too short. You can make MIDI files in Band in a Box, and BIAB can also import poor MIDI files, tart them up and remake them much improved. MIDI still at best sound like a good electronic keyboard and share their difficulty with recreating guitar strumming.

Band in a Box is an amazing program from PG Music in Canada that can be purchased over the internet for a few hundred dollars. There are other programs to make backings (eg Jammer) but BIAB is the acknowledged industry leader.

Apparently its interface appeals young people – it's too "eighties" for them. I've been using it since Band in a Box Version 1 for Windows 3.1, which was around the time of the dinosaurs. It is now updated every year with more styles and sounds available all the time. It can do many

amazing things but the key function is that someone who is not musical can, with a little work, make a competent backing for their parish needs.

Essentially it was designed for the marginally musical. You enter a chord progression; you can enter the notes of the melody if needed one at a time in a rapid intuitive way, and select the style, tempo, repetitions, key and instruments. It was originally MIDI based and as previously noted can even import midi files and tart them up if you wish. If you have a MIDI keyboard and can play notes, this is a quicker way of entering the melody.

It now has a lot of digitised sounds using samples of real musicians so it no longer sounds like an electronic keyboard, which is especially obvious with guitar sounds and it has intuitive soloists if you want a bit of colour. The melody line can use VST (Virtual Studio Technology) instruments or soundfonts if you wish, many of which are freely available on the internet.

There are some BIAB files on the net for public domain hymns, again at Small Church Music, but the idea here is do it yourself. While it can be played from a laptop at the time of the liturgy, the files are perhaps best converted to MP3 and played on any device that plays these files.

The documents of the Catholic Church that refer to music have changed in their acceptance of instrumentation but are clear in that singing is a major way that the assembly participates in liturgy and that music should come from within the local parish. With musicians in short supply lateral thinking is needed either in funding music training locally, encouraging and assisting less skilled players of easier instruments to be involved or taking advantage of technology that now allow a local parish to create or recreate MIDI or BIAB backings for their own purposes.